

## CHAPTER 3

### In This Year

#### *The Politics of Language and the End of Old English*

WILLIAM THE CONQUEROR LANDED IN ENGLAND in October 1066, and though he and his people spoke the dialect of Norman French, Old English was not wiped out overnight. Prose history, poetic lyrics and encomia, and a range of sermons, homilies, and prayers continued to be copied in manuscripts well into the thirteenth century. In the Midlands and the North of England, in particular, linguistic life seemed to go on much as before, with little evidence of French words, syntax, or literary form impinging on the old, alliterative metrics of the Anglo-Saxons. At Peterborough Abbey, about thirty miles northwest of Cambridge, monks continued to compose a chronicle of English history in the style of the Old English annalists. Organized year by year, the so-called *Peterborough Chronicle* limns the political and social life of England from just after the Conquest until 1154. But in addition to its historical record, the *Chronicle* charts the changing English language in the first century of Norman control. Far from the center of that rule, the abbey's monks and scribes preserve an Anglo-Saxon prose almost untouched by Francophone influence. Here, we can see Old English changing, as it were, on its own. Word endings were leveling out. Grammatical gender was disappearing from nouns. The elaborate case system and class system of the nouns was simplifying. The difference between strong and weak adjectives (a feature common to all Germanic languages) was lost, and the old dual form of the verb also disappeared. The spelling of the *Chronicle* text also reveals changes not just in grammar but in pronunciation. The consonant clusters that had characterized the distinctive Old English sound were disappearing. Other changes were affecting consonant sequences, while vowels, too, were altering their length and quality.

It is clear that, whatever the immediate effect the Norman Conquest had on English, the vernacular of Anglo-Saxon England was changing. One theory to explain the loss of endings, and its grammatical consequences, relies on the idea of word stress. Old English, as all Germanic languages, had fixed stress on the root syllable of the word. Regardless of what prefixes or suffixes were added to it, or regardless of the word's grammatical category, the stress remained fixed on the root (other languages, such as those of the Romance family or Greek, have variable word stress). It has been argued that this root stress had a tendency to level out the sounds of unstressed syllables in speech. Some endings may have just been reduced to an unstressed form (say, the short mid-vowel represented in modern phonetic notation as a schwa). In the absence of a fixed and standard system of spelling, late Anglo-Saxon scribes would probably have written what they heard—or, perhaps, written what they thought was correct, even if it was not what they heard.

We can see something of this phenomenon in the *Peterborough Chronicle*. Take, for example, the phrase used to introduce each yearly record—in this year, such and such happened. The entry for 1083 uses the opening formula in precisely grammatical Old English: “On þissum geare” (in this year). The *-um* and *-e* endings signal the dative masculine singular forms of the adjective and noun, following the preposition. As the case endings began to lose their prominence in the spoken language, they became harder to reproduce in the written. The entry for 1117 opens, “On þison geare.” Here, the adjectival ending has leveled to an indiscriminate back vowel plus an indiscriminate nasal. Perhaps this spelling represents a scribe's attempt to preserve what he thinks is a grammatical ending. The entry for 1135 opens, “On þis geare.” Here, we have a total loss of the adjectival ending, together with what may be thought of as a fossilized dative final *-e* in the noun. Concord in grammatical gender has obviously gone by this time. The last entry for the *Peterborough Chronicle*, 1154, opens, “On þis gaer.” Endings have completely dropped away, but the preposition *on* still has its Old English sense of “in” or “at this point,” not the more modern sense (emerging in Middle English) of spatial location.

This is a small but revealing illustration of how Old English was changing on its own. These scribal forms, however, may not exactly reproduce the speech forms of the time. Modern scholars, in fact, believe that the entries dated from 1122 to 1131 were all written at the same time and back dated, and that the entries from 1132 to 1154 were similarly written down

all at one time (clearly, one scribe wrote out the first section, another scribe wrote out the next). What changes such as these do reveal, though, are the ways in which writers try to represent their language as it changes. We see grammatical confusion, different conventions of spelling and letter formation, changing attitudes towards the relationship of writing to speech. The value of the *Peterborough Chronicle* lies, therefore, not in its transcription of year-by-year spoken English but in its thoughtful evocation of an English prose style passing from the scene.

Even the Peterborough monks could not completely escape Norman influence, and their scribes did not only seek to sustain Old English. They sought, as well, to use new words and forms for distinctive aesthetic, as well as political, ends. Language change is a social phenomenon, and the chronicler's choices of word, syntax, prosody, and diction have implications for the world of lived experience.

And the defining figure of that lived experience during the first decades of Norman rule was William himself. The first king in Britain to build castles on the Continental model, to command a written inventory of the land and holdings of the country (what became known as the Domesday Book), and to close off public lands for private use, William left an indelible mark on the English landscape. For the Peterborough annalist, his death becomes the occasion for a personal review of his rule—an entry (dated 1087) whose emotional pitch echoes the pulpit voice of Wulfstan, with its exhortations and laments and its attention to the transitoriness of worldly goods.

Eala, hu leas 7 hu unwrest is þysses middaneardes wela! Se þe wæs  
ætur rice cyng 7 maniges landes hlaforð, he næfde þa ealles landes  
buton seofon fotmæl; 7 se þe wæs hwilon gescrid mid golde 7 mid  
gimmum, he læg þa oferwrogn mid moldan.

[Lo, how transitory and insecure is the wealth of this world! He who was once a powerful king and the lord of many lands, received (in death) no other land but seven feet of it; and he who was once clothed in gold and gems lay then covered with earth.]

Such phrasings would have been familiar to an Anglo-Saxon reader not just from the preachers but from the poets. *Beowulf*, for example, is full of such elegiac moments, as when the poet comments on the burial mound of the dead hero.

forleton eorla gestreon eorðan healdan,  
gold on greote, þær hit nu gen lifað  
eldum swa unnyt, swa hit æror wæs.

(3166–68)

[they let the earth hold the wealth of noblemen,  
the gold in the dust, where it now still remains,  
as useless to men as it ever had been before.]

The Peterborough annalist's phrasings look back to this linguistic and stylistic Anglo-Saxon inheritance, especially in his alliterative pairings (the phrase "mid golde 7 mid gimum" here has a formulaic feel and scan to it).

Like several entries in other versions of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, the *Peterborough Chronicle* entry for 1087 contains not just prose but poetry (though, as in the case of all Old English poetry, its verse is written out continuously as prose). Especially in entries on the death of kings or the martyrdom of men, the chroniclers would offer verse laments, shaped according to the patterns of alliterative metrics and the formulae of the traditional Germanic idiom. Such poems appear in other versions of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle on, for example, the death of King Edward (1065), the coronation of King Edgar (973), and, most famously, the Battle of Brunanburgh (937). The poem on the death of William, however, does something different. For one thing, it rhymes. Now while rhyme was not unknown in Old English poetry, it was not used as the governing, organizational principle for verse (the only exception is the so-called "Rhyming Poem" found in the Exeter Book of verse—a tour de force, modeled most likely on the rhyming antiphons of Latin liturgical song). Though rough in meter and in rhyme, the poem on the Conqueror (known to modern scholars as "The Rime of King William") clearly evokes more the short couplets of Continental verse than it does the alliterative metrics of the Anglo-Saxon. Rhyme in the Latin liturgy and in popular, Romance-language song had come to influence vernacular versemaking on the Continent, and it would come by the thirteenth century to control the Middle English lyric. But what we have in "The Rime of King William" may well be the first English attempt at rhymed verse on the Continental model. As such, this poem stands in stark contrast to the surrounding prose annal. It turns formal, metrical and linguistic choice into social criticism. It is a narrative of foreign imposition told through the imported word and meter. Here are the opening lines.

Castelas he let wyrcean,  
7 earme men swiðe swencean.  
Se cyng wæs swa swiðe stearc,  
7 benam of his underþeoddan manig marc  
goldes 7 ma hundred punda seolfres.  
Ðet he nam be wihte  
7 mid mycelan unrihte  
of his landleode  
for littelre neode.  
He wæs on gitsunge befeallan,  
7 grædinæsse he lufode mid ealle.  
He sætte mycel deorfrið,  
7 he lægde laga þærwið  
þet swa hwa swa sloge heort oððe hinde,  
þet hine man sceolde blendian.

[He had castles built  
and poor men terribly oppressed.  
The king was very severe,  
and he took from his underlings many marks  
of gold and hundreds of pounds of silver.  
All this he took from the people,  
and with great injustice  
from his subjects,  
to gratify his trivial desire.  
He had fallen into avarice,  
and he loved greediness above everything else.  
He established many deer preserves,  
and he set up laws concerning them,  
such that whoever killed a hart or a hind  
should be blinded.]

“Castelas he let wyrcean,” he had castles built: from these first words, the poem signals a new architectural, political, and linguistic order in the land. Castles were foreign to the Anglo-Saxons, who did not build monumentally in dressed stone but rather in timber or flint cobble. The word itself, a loan from Norman French, makes clear the immediate impress of Norman life on English soil. One of the first things William did after the Battle of Hastings was to build a stone castle on the site, and less than three years

after the Conquest, castles were marking the main intersections in the old British road system. Norman barons put up castles of their own, and by the close of William's reign, old land divisions were being reformed as feudal castelries. Wulfstan of Worcester, the last Anglo-Saxon bishop who died under Norman rule in 1095 (not the same Wulfstan of the *Sermo Lupi*), lamented these changes: "Our forefathers could not build as we do . . . but their lives were examples to their flocks. We, neglecting men's souls, care only to pile up stones." More than contrasting the monumental Norman stone architecture with the smaller Anglo-Saxon buildings, Wulfstan voices the controlling equation for post-Conquest writing: changes in the built environment represent both cultural displacement and spiritual loss.

William the Conqueror's moral life lives in the landscape. His control of the forest mirrors his control of the people, and his establishment of hunting laws reveals the dissonance between his love for animals and his contempt for the populace:

Swa swiðe he lufode þa headeor  
swilce he wære heora fæder

[He loved the wild animals  
As if he were their father.]

That he loves the animals like a father implies, of course, that he does not love his people like one. Anyone who would have life or land needs to follow the king's will, the poem continues. William's imposition of his *wille* on the English *land* is the focus of the *Peterborough Chronicle's* 1085 entry on the making of the famous Domesday Book, in which every acre, every tree, every ox, cow, and pig held by the people is catalogued.

As William reshaped English lands, so his elegist in the *Peterborough Chronicle* reshaped English poetry. If its author lived at the Conqueror's court (as the surrounding prose annal implies), then it is likely that he heard the couplets of Norman French verse and the stanzas of Latin hymns and antiphons. His poem here shows us a writer intent on using the principles of Continental verse against a Continental subject. Linguistic and prosodic choices have political meaning—even in Peterborough Abbey, the monks could recognize the words of Norman imposition and the rhyme and meter of non-English literature. By half a century later, Norman rule had been consolidated and, with it, new words and expressions had begun to percolate up through the grounds of Anglo-Saxon. The *Peterborough*

*Chronicle* annal for 1137, like that of 1087, offers a sustained response to social change through the nuances of linguistic choice. Like that of 1087, this entry presents a distinctive literary, as well as an annalistic, voice, and it remains one of the most effective pieces of early English prose.

The entry dated 1137 surveys the entire nineteen-year reign of King Stephen (1135–1154) who presided over strife and famine, cruelties and deprivation so great that, as modern readers would well know, no other English king would ever take his name. It begins traditionally, but soon moves into uncharted social and linguistic turf.

Dis gære for þe king Stephne ofer sæ to Normandi, and ther wes underfangen forþi ðat hi wenden ðat he sculde ben alswic also the eom wes and for he hadde get his tresor—ac he todeld it and scatered sotlice. Micel hadde Henri king gadered gold and sylver, and na god ne dide me for his saule tharof.

[In this year the King Stephen traveled over the sea to Normandy, and there he was received because of the fact that they believed that he should be (treated) just as the uncle (i.e., King Henry I) was, and because he (Stephen) had received (i.e., inherited) his (i.e., Henry's) wealth—but he (i.e., Henry) had dispersed it and scattered it foolishly. King Henry had gathered a great deal of gold and silver, but it was not used for the benefit of his soul.]

Like the critique of William in 1087, or for that matter like the elegiacs of *Beowulf*, this entry recalls how worldly wealth does little for the soul. We enter an Old English verbal world, even down to the barely surviving dative case of the opening words. Though there is no ending for *Dis*, the final *-e* in *gære* signals that the scribe still recognized a case at work. Other shards of the old tongue fill his sentences. Even though there are some classic, Old English verb forms (for example, the past tense of the strong verb *faren* is *for*, and the infinitives and plurals of the verbs end in *-en*) the nouns have clearly lost all sense of grammatical gender. The thorns and edths of Anglo-Saxon spelling are still here, but they share company with the new spelling for their sound, *th-*, an influence of Norman scribal habit. And words do remain from old wordhoard—*underfangen* literally means “taken in under” (thus, “received”); *eom* is the word for “uncle”; *wenden*, “they believed,” shares the root of the word “wene,” still found in regional or archaic English speech.

But that changes when we get to Normandy. For only in Normandy can we speak of Stephen inheriting his uncle Henry's *tresor*: his wealth. A word originally from Latin (*thesaurus*), it appears here, in its Old French form, for the first time in written English, a self-conscious Gallicism in a British landscape.

For the most part, that landscape is syntactically Old English. Traditional *þa/þa* clauses work to indicate temporal correlation:

SUBJECT VERB

VERB SUBJECT

Þa **þe king Stephne** to Engaland **com**, þa **macod he** his gadering  
æt Oxenford, . . .

[When the King Stephen arrived in England, then he made his  
assembly at Oxford, . . .]

But in this syntax lie new words, almost like interlopers. For when Stephen returns, he takes his bishops, Roger of Salisbury and Alexander of Lincoln and puts them in *prisun*. This Old French word shows up, in written English, first in the 1123 *Peterborough Chronicle* entry, and then here in 1137. Like *tresor*, it is a new word from the administrative vocabulary of the Normans. And that administrative vocabulary reappears throughout this year's annal, as if the chronicler were offering instruction in the new lexicon of power in the land. Stephen, we are later told, was really ineffective, and his enemies soon realized this:

Þa the swikes undergæton ðat he milde man was and softe and god  
and na justise ne did, þa diden hi alle wunder.

[When the traitors understood that he was a mild man and was  
gentle and good and did not inflict punishment, then they all per-  
formed atrocities.]

Again, the perfect *þa/þa* pattern, indicating the when/then sequence. Again, the familiar Old English terms taken from the heroic vocabulary (*mild*, *softe*, *god*); again, the familiar word for terror. *Wundor* means not just wonder but something atrocious; it is the kind of thing that Grendel did, and in Old English, this noun had an unmarked plural: one *wundor*, two *wundor*. We are in the old linguistic landscape here—except for *justise*. Originally from the Latin *justus*, fair or equitable, the word took on a special



meaning in Norman French law, what the *OED* defines as “the exercise of authority or power in maintenance of right.” This entry from the *Peterborough Chronicle* is the first appearance of the word in written English.

New words keep popping out of the English matrix here. For when the traitors do their worst, they, too, fill up their *castles*; they put men in *prisun*; they turn their prisoners into *martyrs* (the Greek form of this word was known to the Anglo-Saxons, but the Norman French form comes in for the first time here). Now, the annalist rises to the occasion, offering a list of all the torments in these prisons. The patterns of repetition, the lack of subordination, and the strings of parallels make this description, much like those in Wulfstan’s *Sermo Lupi*, a brilliant display of paratactic power.

Me henged up bi the fet and smoked heom mid ful smoke. Me henged bi the þumbes other bi the hefed and hengen bryniges on her fet. Me dide cnotted strenges abuton here hæved and wrythen it ðat it gæde to þe hærnæs. Hi diden heom in quarterne þar nadres and snakes and pades wæron inne, and drapen heom swa. Sume hi diden in ‘crucethur’—ðat is, in an ceste þat was scort and narew and undep—and did scærpe stanes þerinne, and þrengde þe man þærinne ðat him bræcon alle þe limes.

[They were hung up by the feet and smoked completely with smoke. They were hanged by the thumbs or by the head and mail-coats were hung on their feet. They had strings knotted about their head and twisted to the point that it sank into the brains. They (the bad guys) put them (the good guys) in prisons where there were adders and snakes and toads, and killed them in this way. Some they put into a “crucethur”—that is, in a chest that was short and narrow and shallow—and they put sharp stones in there, and crushed the man who was in it until all his limbs were broken.]

Much like Wulfstan’s, this is now a vision of hell on earth: a catalogue of tortures, implements, and pains. The opening phrase “me henged” is an old passive construction: *me* is the indefinite pronoun (the unstressed form of the word *man*); *henged* is the third person singular past tense. Literally, the phrase translates as “it was hanged to one.” Used in this way, the repeated *me, me, me* rhetorically drives home the tortures to the reader’s eye or listener’s ear. Repetition is the rule for emphasis: “smoked heom mid ful smoke.” The list is the controlling principle. But this is a catalogue not

just of tortures but of words, a lexicon of death. Specialized terms jostle with the familiar here. The word *bryniges* is cognate with Old English *byrnie*, coat of mail; but here, it is the Old Norse form of the word. From Old Norse, too, is the word *hærnes*, “brains,” and the verb for killing, *drapen*. These, and other forms throughout this entry, reflect the legacy of Scandinavian influence on the dialect of the East Midlands of England. But they also reflect a choice on the part of the annalist: the sense that when he comes to write of torture, he evokes the old, but lasting memory of Viking cruelties upon the English.

*Nadres and snakes and pades*: each word a history of pain and language. The Old English word *nadder* lost its initial *n* because it so frequently had the indefinite article *a* before it: *a nadder* became *an adder*. *Snake* comes from Old English *snaca*, a word virtually unchanged during the entire life of English. And *pades* are “toads,” but the word seems to be a regionalism of the North of England—cognate with forms in German, Dutch, Icelandic, and other old and Modern Germanic languages, yet appearing in English first in this passage from the *Peterborough Chronicle* and, as far as anyone can tell, always perceived as something of an odd term.

The words, as well as the works, come from everywhere: Old English, Scandinavianisms, regionalisms, and even Latin technical terms. *Crucethur*, a word that shows up nowhere else in English, has to be defined as a short, narrow, shallow box (modern editors conjecture that the word comes straight from the Latin, *cruciator*, “torturer”). And when the king’s rule disappears and England loses itself in an anarchy of local barons (warlords, really), we are once again granted a lesson in the language of administrative pain:

Hi læiden gældes on the tunes ævre unwile and clepeden it ‘tenserie’.

[They imposed taxes on the towns repeatedly and called it “protection money.”]

There is a brilliance to this definitional moment here, a sensitivity to the doublespeak of power worthy of George Orwell. *Tenserie* comes from Old French, *tenser*, “to protect.” The word shows up in twelfth-century Latin documents (and uniquely in English in the Peterborough annal) to mean exactly what modern readers might think that it means: payment for local protection. There is a sense here not just of a new word being used in writing but a new word being introduced into the populace: as if the warlords were instructing English men and women in the language of power.

New and old words jostle throughout this entry in ways that make politics and language inseparable. French terms from Norman power come in, but Old English phrases, syntax, and idioms remain the expressive baseline of the land. Indeed, when the annalist speaks in his own voice, he is clearly drawing on the diction of the Anglo-Saxon pulpit and the scop. Rhythm and alliteration fill his laments, to the point where one may well wonder if his annal is ventriloquizing some popular or preexisting poem on these miseries.

Hi hadden him manred maked and athes sworn, ac hi nan treuthe  
ne heolden. Alle he wæron forsworen and here treothes forloren, for  
ævríc rice man his castles makede and agænes him heolden, and  
fylðen þe land ful of castles.

[They had done homage to him (i.e., the king) and had sworn oaths, but they did not honor their fealty. They all perjured themselves and abrogated their fealty, for every nobleman made for himself castles and held them against him (i.e., the king), and they filled the land full of castles.]

Notice the alliterative patterns and the assonances: *manred maked*; *athes sworn* / *forsworen* / *forloren*. Notice, too, the similar patterns later in the entry, when the annalist describes the attempt of the bishops to excommunicate the traitors:

oc was heom naht þarof, for hi weron al for cursæd and forsworen  
and forloren

[But it mattered nothing to them, for they were all already cursed, and perjured, and lost.]

And, finally, notice the first person voice emerging from this matrix: a voice quite literally crying in the wilderness.

I ne can ne I ne mai tellen alle þe wunder ne alle þe pines ðat hi  
diden wrecce men on þis land.

[I cannot nor may I not tell of all the atrocities nor of all the torments that they did to the wretched men of this country.]

The rhythm of these repetitions is the rhythm of the orator—compare Wulfstan’s phrasing from the *Sermo Lupi*, “mænige synd forsworene and swyþe forlogene” (many are perjured and completely perjured themselves).

The English writing of the late eleventh and the twelfth centuries shares with the poetry and prose of the *Peterborough Chronicle* a concern with how a personal, vernacular voice can express the changing social order. At Worcester Cathedral, poets and scribes were still attempting to preserve the old alliterative metrics of the scop. In their laments for learning we may hear the sounds akin to those of Peterborough.

Nu is þeo leore forleten, and þet folc is forloren.  
Nu beoþ oþre leoden þeo lærþ ure folc,  
And feole of þen lorþeines losiaþ and þet folc forþ mid.

[Now that teaching is forsaken, and the people are lost.  
Now there is another people that teaches our folk,  
And many of our teachers are dead, and our people with them.]

These lines from a poem known as *The First Worcester Fragment* share with the other writings of post-Conquest England something of an elegiac cast. They share, too, a distinctive vernacular diction. The phrase *forleten* and . . . *forloren* chimes with the alliterations of the *Peterborough Chronicle*, while the word for teachers, *lorþeines*, evokes once again that kenning-making sensibility that shaped Old English literary life. These are the thanes of lore, much as students were *leorningcnihtas*, knights of learning. While the school system was monastic and its subject matter Christian, the relationships of teacher and student remain modeled on the old Germanic tiers of thane and knight.

Loss is everywhere. The early-thirteenth-century poem known as *The Grave* laments the loss of riches and of bodily strength in ways that recall the elegy on William from the *Peterborough Chronicle*:

Ne bið no þin hus healice itinbred;  
hit bið unheh and lah þonne þu list þerinne.

[And now your house is not built high;  
it is short and low, when you lie within it.]

Recall how William, for all of his worldly wealth, wound up with only seven feet of earth; or how the *crucethur* was short and undeep. The word for

“built” here is *itinbred*, with the word *timbrian* at its root: to timber, the Old English word for building not in stone. In the thirteenth-century poem *The Latemest Day*, these Anglo-Saxon idioms move almost seamlessly from the alliterative verse forms of the past into a Middle English lyric indebted to Continental models for its rhymed quatrains:

Pi bur is sone ibuld þer þu shald wunien inne,  
þe rof, þe firste, schal ligge o þine chinne;  
Nu þe sculen wormes wunien wiþ-inne,  
Ne mai ne heom vt driuen wið nones kunnes ginne.

[Your bower is soon built where you shall dwell inside,  
The roof, the inner ceiling, shall rest on your chin;  
Now worms shall dwell with you inside,  
And no manner of ingenuity can drive them away.]

Here, in this little grave, the roof lies so close that it touches the chin. How far are we from *Caedmon's Hymn*, where God's creation lay in being able *heofon to hrofe*, to put a roof on heaven? How far are we, too, from the sounds of Old English: the characteristic initial *hr*-consonant cluster of *hrofe* has now been simplified to the initial *r*- of *rof* (so, too, throughout this period, initial clusters such as *hl* and *hn* were simplified to *l* and *n*: Old English *hlud* became loud; Old English *hnegan* became neigh). Other changes in sound, spelling, and grammar that appear at this time include the loss of the *ge*- prefix for the participle of a verb (in *The Grave* and *The Latemest Day*, it has been reduced simply to *i*:- *itinbred*, *ibuld*). But perhaps the most notable new thing about this stanza from *The Latemest Day* is its last word. *Ginne* meant cunning, craftiness, or artifice; ingenuity; or a contrivance. It comes from the Old French word *engin*, ultimately from the Latin *ingenium*, and it begins to appear in English texts at the beginning of the thirteenth century.

No kind of *ginne* can cheat death; even the technologies of new Norman power cannot change the all too familiar facts of life's end. When you live and die on English soil, you live and die in English. No imported *ginne* can matter. And yet, for the poet of *The Owl and the Nightingale*, writing at about this same time, *ginne* is power. Here, two birds debate their relative merits in ways that reflect the poet's sensitive awareness of the natural world and his deep learning in the traditions of Latin debate poetry, the philosophical argumentations of the schools, and the lyric modes of Romance-language

verse. Written in rhymed couplets, *The Owl and the Nightingale* begins in a supple, Continental manner:

Ich was in one sumere dale;  
In one suþe diȝele hale  
Iherde ich holde grete tale  
An Hule and one Niztingale.

[I was in a summer valley;  
In a secret, hidden nook,  
I heard a great debate held  
Between an Owl and a Nightingale.]

Though arranged in precise octosyllabic lines and perfect rhymes, all the words in these first four lines come directly from Old English. This is an English landscape, as the Nightingale begins to speak, the poet later tells us, in a corner of a *breche*, a fallow field. This word denotes explicitly the fields, broken up for cultivation, that were the result of William the Conqueror's domestication of the forest. New towns took on new names, each one of which signaled that they were *breches*: Gilbertesbreche, Parkeresbreche, Brechehurne. With each new clearing came, too, a new castle. The Nightingale herself recognizes this, in an early disclaimer to the Owl's accusations of her weakness:

I habbe on brede & eck on lengþe  
Castel god on mine rise.

[I have in the length and breadth of my bough,  
A castle, good in every respect.]

Alive to a political landscape manipulated by castellation, she equates her own strength with that of William the Conqueror: "Castelas he let wyrcean." Closer to the date of the poem's composition, the Nightingale's references would recall, too, the castle building and besieging of King Stephen's reign:

Mid lutle strengþe þurȝ ginne  
Castel & burȝ me mai iwinne;  
Mid liste me mai walles felle  
And worþ of horsse kniȝtes snelle.

[With only a little strength, but through ingenuity,  
One may conquer castle and town;  
One may bring down walls with deceit  
And throw bold knights off their horses.]

But here, the castle falls before the Nightingale's *ginne*. In an English landscape full of newer castles and older burgs, what remains in the aftermath of conquest and anarchy is not so much brute strength as ingenuity. For students, poets, readers, and even singing birds in the two centuries after the Norman Conquest, the question would no longer be that of Bishop Ælfric and his *Colloquy*: "Canst þu ænig cræft?" Instead it would be a question about *ginne*: about the ingenious imagination that could begin to synthesize Old English verbal forms with French nouns and poetic structures to express a unique voice. And in that *ginne* lies the beginnings of the ingenuity of language itself: the skill at finding new words, not to clarify but to occlude, to give the institutions of control new names, to teach the people where the power lies. We see, here, the beginnings of that tension between English and Romance or Latinate vocabulary, and while we are not completely in the world of modern euphemism, we can see the inklings of a time when, as George Orwell had put it, these newer words will fall upon our lives "like soft snow, blurring the outlines and covering up all the details."

## From Kingdom to Realm

### *Middle English in a French World*

BY THE MIDDLE OF THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY, the English language of both script and street was palpably different from the English at the time of the Conquest. The Old English vowels and consonants had, for the most part, changed into the forms we now recognize as “Middle English.” The grammatical system had simplified; word-order patterns were the primary determiners of meaning in a sentence; and the lexicon was filling with words from Norman and, later, central French. Though there were many regional dialect variations, speakers and writers of English two centuries after the Conquest largely thought of themselves as having a shared vernacular.

The Norman impact lay in more than nouns. French grammar and syntax had their effect, and by the end of the thirteenth century English idioms (even if they were made up completely of originally Old English terms) were shaping themselves to French order. An expression such as “to hold dear” is modeled directly on the Old French *tenir chier*. “To put to death” comes directly from the French *mettre à mort*. Even though the words in these expressions are English, the idioms are French. So, too, verbs such as “do,” “give,” “have,” “make,” and “take” came to be used in their French equivalent senses. English idioms such as “do battle,” “give offence,” “have mercy,” “make peace,” “take pains,” and the like are really just translations of French expressions, most of which used the verbs *avoir* (“have”) and *faire* (“do” or “make”). Even as early as the *Peterborough Chronicle*, some of these locutions start to appear (the phrase “na justise ne did,” does not merely borrow the Old French word *justise* but takes the whole expression *faire justise*, “to punish or inflict judgment,” as its model).

Rather than building new words out of the familiar stock of roots or morphemes, as Old English did, Middle English borrowed terms directly from other languages. The Normans brought new words for learning, commerce,



administration, the church, technology, cooking, and so on. Such words are easily recognizable: they are often polysyllabic, with distinguishing sounds and spellings. Old English and new French words stood side by side, but differed in shades of meaning or connotation. In the early nineteenth century, the novelist Sir Walter Scott developed one of the most famous (if overstated) distillations of this verbal doubling in his analysis of words for food. The Anglo-Saxon raised the food, whereas the Norman Frenchman ate it. Thus our words for animals remain Old English: sow, cow, calf, sheep, deer. Our words for meats are French: pork, beef, veal, mutton, venison.

Of course, Anglo-French linguistic contact was more complicated than that, and the development of Middle English involves far more than the layering of a Gallic veneer on an Anglo-Saxon base. What it does involve is a larger set of social and political relationships among the speakers and writers of three languages (English, French, and Latin) and an emerging sense of nationhood associated not just with a geographical residence but with a vernacular identity. Latin was the language of the Church, French of noble culture and administration, English of the people. But, as Thorlac Turville-Petre has made clear in his detailed study of medieval English literary culture, these three languages were not as clearly stratified as we might think. They existed “not just side by side but in symbiotic relationship, interpenetrating and drawing strength from one another; not just three cultures but one culture in three voices” (Turville-Petre, *England*, 181).

Those three voices show up for the first time, officially and simultaneously, in the 1258 proclamation of King Henry III announcing his adherence to the so-called Provisions of Oxford. Henry had sworn to observe the Magna Carta, that famous document of English legal history in which King John in 1215 had ceded absolute authority to a baronial confederation and a nascent Parliament. But Henry reneged on his promise. He styled himself far more a European than an English monarch, favoring his French relatives in power and preoccupied with maintaining his inheritance from the Angevin royal line. He was widely criticized for promoting non-English courtly and political figures, to the point that his barons stipulated that, “England should in future be governed by native-born men, and that aliens must depart” (*England*, 6). By October 1258, the conflict with Henry reached a breaking point, and the barons compelled him to accept and proclaim his adherence to the Magna Carta, to a thrice-yearly meeting of Parliament, and, most generally, to what appears to us today to be a kind of constitutional monarchy.

The Proclamation that affirmed this agreement was issued in Latin, French, and English—the first time an official, royal document appeared

in English since the Conquest. It is a fascinating piece of writing, not just revealing the details of the English language of the mid-thirteenth century but illuminating the relationships of language and national identity emerging at the time. The English text is, scholars have long noted, a translation of the French, and certain facets of the language emerge by comparing the two versions. Just look at the opening sentences:

Henri, þurȝ Godes fultume King on Engleneloande, Lhoaverd on Yrloande, Duk on Normandi, on Aquitaine, and Eorl on Anjow, send i-gretinge to alle hise holde, i-lærde and i-leawede on Huntendone-schire. Þæt witen ȝe wel alle þæt we willen and unnen þæt þæt ure rædesmen, alle oper þe moare dæl of heom þæt beoþ i-chosen þurȝ us and þurȝ þæt loandes folk on ure kuneriche, habbeþ i-don and schullen don in þe worþness of Gode and on ure treowþe, for þe fremme of þe loande, þurȝ þe besizte of of þan toforen i-seide redesmen, beo stedefæst and i-lestinde in alle þinge abuten ænde.

Henri, par le grace Deu, Rey de Engleterre, sire de Irlande, duc de Normandie, de Aquitien, et cunte de Angou, a tuz sez feaus clers et lays saluz. Sachez ke nus volons et otrions ke se ke nostre conseil, u la greignure partie de eus ki est esluz par nus et par le commun de nostre reaume, a fet, u fera, al honur de Deu et nostre fei, et pur le profit de notre reaume sicum il ordenera seit ferm et estable en toutes choses a tuz jurz;

(Mossé, *Handbook of Middle English*, 187–88)

[Henry, by the grace of God King of England, Lord of Ireland, Duke of Normandy and of Aquitaine, and Earl of Anjou, sends greeting to all of his subjects, the learned and the unlearned, in Huntingtongshire. You all know well that we want and desire that our counselors, the greater portion of whom that have been chosen by us and by the people in our kingdom, have acted and should act according to the honor of God and fidelity to us, and for the good of the realm, according to the provisions of those aforesaid counselors, that they be steadfast and firm in all things forever.]

The first thing the modern reader notices is the vocabulary. The French *le grace Deu* becomes the English *Godes fultume*. The word *fultume* comes from Old English, where it meant aid, support, or help. It could be used in both secular and sacred contexts: one could help someone else or God could

help us. Etymologically, the word has *full* at its root: fullness, completion, a making whole. It passes into Middle English, but it seems clear that by the late thirteenth century, the word was gone, and the Proclamation of 1258 may be, in fact, the last datable appearance of the word in English writing. The French idiom, *par le grace Dieu*, would become “by the grace of God,” and would efface *fulturn* from English. What we see here in the English version of Henry III’s Proclamation is, I think, a deliberately old-fashioned English. Throughout the English text, the language seems reluctant to admit French terms. Only the technical terms of power and position appear: *Duk* is French, as is the title *Mareschal*, used later in the text. But “cunte de Angou” is Anglicized to “Eorl on Anjou.”

So, too, French verbal idioms take on an Anglo-Saxon flavor. Henry addresses both the clerics and the laymen (*clers et lays*), but this transforms itself into an English pairing redolent of the old, alliterative formulae: *i-lærde* and *i-leawede*, the learned and the lewd (Old English *lewed* meant not “obscene” but “untutored” or “common”). The English text, by the way, was sent to all the counties in the country, and in this surviving copy it is clear that this was the copy sent to Huntingtongshire.

The opening of the second sentence in French is *Sachez ke*, “you know that.” This phrase becomes an Old English-style correlative clause: “Ðæt witen 3e wel alle þæt” (“That [fact], let all of you know, [namely] that . . .”). As if to complete the Anglo-Saxon verbal texture of this passage, the French word *conseil*, counselors, becomes the old word *rædesmen*. Hrothgar has his men who give *ræd* (advice) and the famous Anglo-Saxon king we know today as Æthelred “The Unready” was, in fact, known in his own time as *Æthelred unræd* (Æthelred the ill-advised). Like *fulturne*, *rædesmen* is a word clearly passing from the Middle English vocabulary.

More local phrasings abound, for these *rædesmen* were “chosen from among us and from among the people of the land of our country.” The English *loandes folk on ure kuneriche* translates the French *le commun de nostre reaume*, but the translation is hardly transparent. The *loandes folk*, the folk of the land, is a phrase that connotes not political brilliance or baronial entitlement but everydayness. It is a phrase less to describe the counselors to the king and more to evoke the audience for this English text. It is a subtle way of bringing the folk to the King’s side and affirming their place in the *kuneriche*, the kingdom—a word that defined the country through the ruler (king-dom), unlike the French word *reaume* (realm) that connoted a more abstract and porous sense of rule.

Some of these English words, then, are familiar; some are strange to us now. But a look at the French shows us what would become the common

words of politics and public administration: *honur* (honor), *fei* (faith), *profit*, *ferm et estable* (firm and stable); and, later on, we find *comandons* (we command), *enemi mortel* (mortal enemy), and *tresor* (treasure). These words were clearly part of not just the French but of the Middle English public vocabulary by the middle of the thirteenth century. And yet, the English of the Proclamation translates all of them into what could only be described as an aggressively old-fashioned vernacular:

<i>honur</i>	<i>treoþe</i>
<i>profit</i>	<i>freme</i>
<i>reaume</i>	<i>londe</i>
<i>ferm et estable</i>	<i>stedfæst and i-lestinde</i>
<i>comandons</i>	<i>hoaten</i>
<i>enemi mortel</i>	<i>deadlice i-foan</i>
<i>tresor</i>	<i>hord</i>

Just about all of these French words are attested in use by the end of the thirteenth century (the word *tresor* had already appeared in the *Peterborough Chronicle*), and none of them would have been absolutely opaque to an English reader at the time of Henry's Proclamation. For what we have here is not simply a translation of a French document for a wider circulation among a non-French audience. What we have is a political statement about the English language and the English people. By rephrasing official French into an already old-fashioned, deliberately Anglo-Saxon phraseology, this version sends a message. In Thorlac Turville-Petre's terms, both king and barons must have "recognized the value in the propaganda of patriotism of reaching beyond the constituency of royal officials and appropriating (however speciously) the language of the 'loandes folk' in order to involve a wider section of the population in the political program of reform" (*England*, 9).

By the end of the thirteenth century, the politics of English had become explicit. In 1295, King Edward I could accuse the French of trying to rid England of the English language. Chronicles, lyrics, and narrative poems of the early fourteenth century take a special interest in the ways in which English and French, for all their intermingling, still had social associations. In the first third of the fourteenth century, Robert of Gloucester could write that the Normans were the "heyemen" of England and the Saxons the "lowemen." The historian Robert Manning of Brunne, writing at the end of the 1330s, claimed that those who are now "Ingliš" were originally "Saxons." And the religious poem, *Cursor Mundi*, written at about

the same time recognizes that, even though there are dialect differences in English—a “sotherin Englis” from which the author has turned his story into “northren lede”—“Inglanð the nacioun” is a place defined by language (see Turville-Petre, *England*, 15–20).

The multilingual quality of British literature at this time, however, crosses many boundaries, and the best and best-known testimony to trilingual medieval England is the set of poems written in the manuscript now catalogued as British Library Manuscript Harley 2253. Compiled sometime in the 1330s or 1340s, this manuscript preserves some of the most exquisite and most famous Middle English lyrics. Its contents have filled anthologies from those of the late eighteenth century to those of our own schoolrooms today. These are beautiful poems, voicing a lyric sensibility that melds vernacular nuance with an attentiveness to the natural and the emotional world.

When þe nytegeale singes þe wodes waxen grene.  
Lef ant gras ant blosme springes in Aueryl, Y wene,  
Ant loue is to myn herte gon wiþ one spere so kene—  
Nyht ant day my blod hit drynkes; myn herte deþ me tene.

[When the nightingale sings the woods turn green.  
Leaf and grass and blossom spring in April, I know,  
And love has gone into my heart with a spear so sharp—  
Night and day, love drinks up my blood; my heart makes me suffer.]

The poem takes the commonplaces of the European love lyric—the wounding spear of love, the nightingale as symbol of desire, the April turn of season as a turn of heart—and makes them uniquely English. The beloved, later in the poem, is the *lemmon*, the word used throughout Middle English to describe the object of desire (it comes from the Old English *leof*, loved, and *mon*, one; *leofmon* is reduced, over time, to *lemmon* or *leman* by the same principle of syncretism as Old English *hlafweard* became “lord” and *hlæfdige* became “lady”). But that *lemmon* is more than just a lover; she becomes the poet’s healer: “A suete cos of þy mouþ might be my leche.” A sweet kiss of your mouth might be my doctor. The word *leche* comes from the Old English *læce*, meaning physician or healer (it may, possibly, come from the same root as the word for the blood-sucking animal, the leech, long used in folk medicine). But it took on, in Middle English verse, both a secular and a sacred connotation. Jesus was the “soules leche” throughout devotional poetry, and this poem, in particular, often blurs the line between the passions of carnal

love and the Passion of Christ (the blood imagery, the sense of suffering, the physicality of pain here are all part of the religious as well as the amorous diction). But, in the end, the recollections of the Passion or clichés of the European lyric fade before a compelling, local Englishness:

Bituene Lyncolne ant Lyndeseye, Norhamptoun ant Lounde,  
Ne wot Y non so fayr a may as Y go fore ybounde.

[From Lincoln to Lindsay, from Northampton to London,  
I do not know of so fair a maiden as the one to whom I am bound.]

The Harley 2253 Manuscript is filled with poems of such power and complexity, such sophistication and vernacularity. But it is filled, too, with poems and prose in French and Latin. Often interlarded with one another on the page, these different texts evoke an engaging trilingualism for the manuscript and its intended audience. On one page, in particular, poems in English, French, and Latin follow each other in sequence, and this linguistic meshing takes on a new and deft form in the concluding lines of the last, Latin poem. A love lyric akin in power and naturalism to the English and French poems in the manuscript (it begins, “Dum ludis floribus,” when you played among flowers), it ends in a tour de force of scribal brilliance.

Scripsi hec carmina in tabulis;  
Mon ostel est en mi la vile de Paris;  
May y sugge namore, so wel me is;  
zef hi deze for loue of hire, duel hit ys.

[I have written these verses on my tablets;  
My dwelling is in the middle of the city of Paris;  
Let me say no more, so things are fine (i.e., leave well enough alone);  
If I die for love of her, it would be a pity.]

When this poet writes about the act of writing he does so in Latin: in language reminiscent of such classical epigrammatists as Martial and his medieval scholastic heirs. When he announces his dwelling in Paris—that is, when he affirms that he is a student in the leading university city of the day—he does so in French. And when he announces, in that final couplet, that he may not speak anymore and that he would die of love, he does so in the rich colloquialisms of Middle English.

The story of that Middle English, therefore, must be told as part of a larger story of a multilingual England. For, even though Henry III's Proclamation marks a turning point in the official use of English, French remained the language of the court, of government, of law, and of high culture well into the early fifteenth century. Some of the most famous works of medieval French literature—*The Song of Roland*, the *Lais* of Marie de France—survive in manuscripts written in England. The *Jeu d'Adam*, one of the very first medieval dramatic works in a vernacular, is a French work written in England in the twelfth century. In Robert of Gloucester's words, from the early fourteenth century, "lowe men holdeþ to Engliss" (lowborn men stay with English), and "Vor bote a man conne frenss, / Me telþ of him lute" (unless a man knows French there is little to say about him).

And yet, the French that men and women knew was not some uniform language. The Norman dialect had its own special words and sounds. It differed from the central French, or Parisian dialect which came in with the Angevin kings in the thirteenth century and with new cultural and social affiliations. English people wishing to learn French would have been acutely aware of such distinctions, and one of the most revealing documents of early language pedagogy is the *Traité sur la lange française* by Walter of Bibbesworth. Walter was an English knight who served in Henry III's court in the middle of the thirteenth century, and he composed this *Treatise* for the children of a gentry-woman in order to teach them the language of *husbondrie e manaugerie* (husbandry and management).

Walter's *Treatise* does more, however, than just teach vocabulary or expression. It teaches a conception of language itself: a sense of how the lexicon articulates a social register; of how the grammar of English and French differ; and of how command of spoken and of written language are two different skills. The *Treatise* is in French verse, with some English words written between the lines. Here is a representative selection:

lip        the hare

Vous avez la levere et le levere,

the pount        book

La livere et le livere,

La levere c'est ke enchost les dens,

Le levere ki boys se tent dedeins,

La livere sert de marchaundie,

Le livere nous aprent clergie

[You have the lip and the hare, the pound and the book; the lip which surrounds the teeth, the hare which hides in the woods, the pound which is used in trade, the book which teaches us clergy.]

Walter aims to train the reader's eye and ear to the different grammatical and phonemic qualities of French. He establishes what modern linguists would call a minimal pair, that is, two words that differ only in one phoneme, in distinguishing *livere* and *levere*. In addition, he establishes the category of grammatical gender as another distinguishing feature: *la livere* / *le livere*; *la leverre* / *le leverre*. Writing in the middle of the thirteenth century, Walter makes unmistakably clear that the concept of grammatical gender needs to be taught and that it has disappeared from English.

What he also makes clear is that the study of language is an education in culture as well as grammar. The terms he addresses are for parts of the body, hunting, commerce, and learning. This is an education in the social arts, in words for polite conversation, courtiership, and intellectual discourse. His disquisition on the many different words for "red," for example, illuminates the nature of register in discourse (the red hair of a knight, he notes, is *rous*, while his red horse is *sor*, his red shield is *goules*, and his red lance is *rouge*). More than just a lesson book for French, Walter's *Treatise* is a lesson book for *good* French. And by good French he means skill in both speaking and reading. By including the interlineations in the manuscript of his work (you will first find the French and then the English above it, he notes), he builds up a vocabulary of the spoken language designed, in the end, to enhance one's command of the written language.

Walter distinguishes between the spoken and the written, and so did Henry III. His Proclamation opened with a greeting to everyone in his purview, *clers et lays* (clerics and laymen). This phrase shows up in English as *i-lærde* and *i-leawede*, and I have already mentioned how the English version evokes the old formulaic and alliterative diction to translate the French. But now, read against Walter's contemporary *Treatise*, we can see how Henry's distinction is also one of communicative venue. The clerics and the lay, the learned and the lewd, are the literate and the illiterate. Clerics, quite simply, read. They define themselves, throughout the English and European Middle Ages, as the *literati*, those taught from the books and living with the books. When Walter states, "*le livere nous aprent clergie*," the book teaches us clergy, he identifies himself with the literate, clerical class—the class trained in the arts of *grammatica*, the schoolroom skills of number, case, and gender, of lexicography and spelling. In fact, that



very notion of spelling comes not from Old English but Old French—for the word *spellian* in Old English meant to talk or tell a story or to move with speech (it is the root of the Old English word *god-spell*, the good talk, and thus our Modern English “gospel”). The Old French word *espelir*, by contrast, meant to set out by letters, and it is only late in Middle English that this word converges with *spellian* to produce a verb, *spellen*, that could mean both speak and spell. As far as any one can tell, the earliest attested use of “spell” in English meaning “to form by letters” is in Walter’s *Treatise*. There, the phrase, “espau nautrement ki les letters ensemble prent,” gets the gloss, *spelieth*.

Walter’s is thus an art of spelling in both senses of the word. But even when an Englishman would spell in spoken English, it might not be spelled out in that form. A revealing example of this fissure is the Parliamentary record of 1362. For the first time, Parliament was opened with a speech in English, and even though English had most likely been spoken in Parliament before then, this is the first time that the clerks of the *Rotuli Parliamentorum* (the official record of proceedings) admit it.

Au quell jour, esteanz nostre Seigneur le Roi, Prelatz, Countes, Barons, & les Communes en la Chambre de Peinte . . . monstre en Englois par . . . de Grene, Chief Justice le Roi, les Causes de Somons du Parlement.

[On this day, in the presence of our lord the King, the counts, the barons, and the privy counselors of the painted chamber, the King’s Chief Justice, Green, announced the causes of the summons to Parliament in English.]

Parliament is addressed in English, but the record is in French—this in spite of the fact that this very same Parliament passed a statute that all court proceedings be henceforth conducted in English (*pledez & monstrez en la lange Engleise*) because the litigants could no longer understand French (*la lange Franceois, q’est trop desconu en la dit Roialme*—“the French language, which has been fully discontinued in the speech of the realm”).

But just what was *la dit Roialme*? English does not show up in the parliamentary records until the petition of the Mercers’ Guild in 1388; the first post-Conquest English king to have a will in English was Henry IV, who died in 1421; the first English guild to record its accounts in English was the Brewer’s Guild, in 1422. Chaucer’s contemporary John Gower could

write long poems in both French and Latin, clearly expecting them to have as wide a readership as his poetry in English. Even Chaucer himself, some modern scholars think, began his career as a French court poet.

Still, English remained a language of imaginative expression. In addition to such poems as the Harley Lyrics, there were romances, chronicles, saints' lives, prose allegories, devotional works, social satires, manuals of household behavior—just about every conceivable kind of writing could be and was done in English (as, needless to say, they could be and were done in French and Latin, too). There emerged not just a wide use of English but a vernacular sensibility: a way of understanding just what the political and social consequences were of praying, doing business, dreaming, writing, and living in English. Henry III's Proclamation, or the lyric drama of the Harley poems, uses the language for social ends: to make a point about the nature of royal power, to make a point about the nature of the landscape, to make a point about what it means to feel on the road from Lincoln to Lindsey, Northampton to London. English, in other words, became a vehicle of social and emotional movement.

Julian of Norwich, whose *Revelation of Divine Love* was composed in the 1380s, can still move us in her tongue. She transforms a Latinate religious idiom into English; indeed, the word "revelation" becomes, in her text, the English word *schewynge*. Look, for example, at this brief passage from the so-called Short Text of her work.

Botte God forbade that ye schulde saye or take it so that I am a techere,  
for I meene nought soo, no I mente nevere so. For I am a woman,  
leued, febille, and freylle. But I wate wele that this I saye. I hafe it of  
the schewynge of hym that es soverayne techare. Botte sothelye, char-  
yte styrres me to tell yowe it, for I wolde god ware knawenn and my  
eveynn-Crysten ne spede, as I wolde be myselfe, to the mare hatynge  
of synne and lovyng of God.

[But God forbade it that you should say or believe that I am a teach-  
er, for I do not intend to be so, nor have I ever intended it. For I  
am a woman, unlearned, feeble, and frail. But I am fully convinced  
of what I say. I have received it from the revelation of him who  
is the sovereign teacher. And truly, charity moves me to tell it to  
you, because it is my wish that God be known and that my fellow  
Christians prosper, as I would myself, through hating sin more and  
loving God.]

Such a passage reveals the fluency of Middle English as a theological tongue. Its sentences are short, evocative of everyday speech. Its vocabulary is local, native, even—at times, perhaps, to modern readers—naïve. This is, as the editors of the recent volume *The Idea of the Vernacular* put it, a “language of equality,” a language that constructs an audience of all English Christians (Wogan-Browne et al., *The Idea of the Vernacular*, 83). In such a language, the very word for the community of Christians is an old-fashioned, Anglo-Saxon-sounding compound: *eveynn-Crystenne*, fellow Christians. There are few words from French or Latin here. *Febille* and *freylle* come originally from the Latin by way of French, but their juxtaposition here, in what reads as an old-fashioned, English alliterative pairing, calls attention away from their etymological origins and toward their native sound. But in this passage, there are two words of distinctively non-English origin, used for powerful effect: God is the “*soverayne* techare,” a teacher who is not only the chief instructor of the faith but the very sovereign of doctrine; and the love of this God is very pointedly “charyte,” a word that goes back to the *caritas* of Saint Paul, Saint Augustine, and the whole tradition of patristic theology.

Julian’s word choice and rhythms are more supple and compelling than, frankly, anything that Geoffrey Chaucer wrote in prose, and she stands as a good foil for those who would claim that Chaucer somehow “invented” English as a literary language. Yes, he did use words in new ways; he did develop a decasyllabic line that would become a metrical standard for English verse; and he did wrest a personal, poetic voice out of the mix of available dialects and idioms. But he did so not in the vacuum of a solitary imagination but on busy streets and crowded docks, in the midst of parliamentary argument and courtly feigning. Chaucer’s achievement needs to be assessed against this history of French and English: a history of the learned and lewd, of Aprils and lemmons, of lips and hares and pounds and books.



## Overview of Key Changes from Old English to Middle English

### *Pronunciation*

Consonants: OE lost its characteristic consonant clusters

hl, hn, hr became l, n, r: OE *hring* > ring; OE *hlud* > loud; OE *hne-gan* > neigh

fn became sn: OE *fnæstian* > sneeze

hw lost its aspiration to become written as w or wh: OE *hwæt*, *hwa*,  
*hwicce* > what, who, which

OE also lost consonants in the middle of words as part of a process known as assimilation.

OE *hlaford* > Early ME *laverd* > late ME *lord*

OE *hlæfdige* > Early ME *levedi* > late ME *lady*

Vowels: among the many changes in the Old English vowel system, two stand out, not just for their own interest but for help in dating sound changes and loan-words.

Lengthening in open syllables: a vowel in an open syllable is one followed by a single consonant or a consonant and another vowel.

OE *nama*, which had a short /a/ became ME *name*, which had a long /a:/

OE *abidan*, which had a short /i/ became ME *abide*, which had a long /i:/

Remember here that vowel length is a quantitative matter: it depends on how long you hold the vowel, not on differences of where you pronounce it in the mouth.

The other important change is that OE long a /a:/ became Middle English long o, which would have been pronounced as /ɔ:/.

OE *ham*, *ban*, *swa* > ME *home*, *bone*, *so*.

On the basis of rhymes in poetry and loan words, the qualitative change of OE long *a* to ME long *o* must have happened before lengthening in open syllables, otherwise all long *a* sounds in ME would have merged together (that is, we would be saying “nome” instead of “name”).

Metathesis: the transposing of two sounds pronounced in sequence. While this is often a function of everyday speech or regional dialect variation (e.g., “psghetti” for spaghetti; “aks” for ask), it permanently affected the pronunciation of some words in the transition from OE to ME:

OE *brid* > ME *bird*; OE *axian* > ME *ask*; OE *þurh* > ME *through*;  
OE *beorht* > ME *bright*

Articulative intrusion: the adding of a sound in the course of pronouncing several sounds together. This is also often a function of everyday speech (e.g., saying the word “something” as if it were “sumpthing”: saying the word “dance” as if it were “dants”). It also affected permanently the pronunciation of some words in the transition from OE to ME:

OE *slummer* > ME *slumber*; OE *æmtig* > ME *empty*; OE *glisnian* > ME *glisten*;  
OE *þunnor* > ME *thunder*

### *Morphology*

The endings of the ME verb remained pretty much the same as in OE, even though the elaborate system of verb classes disappeared. Generally speaking, the infinitive and plural of verbs end in *-en*; the singular third person ends in *-eth*; the singular second person ends in *-st*.

OE distinguished between strong and weak verbs. Strong verbs signaled change in tense by changes in the root vowel: e.g., run, ran; think, thought; drink, drank, drunk. Weak verbs signal the past tense by adding a suffix, usually *-ed* or *-d*: e.g., walk, walked; love, loved. Many strong verbs from OE survived into ME, but some did not: for example, knead, help, and wax (meaning “to grow”) became weak verbs in Middle English (though, in some texts, the strong forms are also used). All verbs borrowed into English from the ME period onwards are borrowed as weak verbs.

The endings of the ME noun illustrate the loss of the OE case system. Occasionally, there is a final *-e* in some words indicating the dative case (for example, in the phrase “out of *toune*”). But otherwise, the only remaining markers of case in ME (as in Modern English) are the final *-s* in plurals and possessives.

With pronouns, ME lost the OE dual (a special form meaning “we two”). It kept, however, the two forms of the second person to distinguish formal and plural from informal and singular. The Middle English pronominal system by the time of Chaucer (late-fourteenth-century, London), is as follows:

I	we	thou	ye	he	she	it/hit	they
me	us	thee	you	him/hi	hir		hem
my(n)	our	thy(n)	your	his	hire		here

With the loss of grammatical gender, ME came to use the word *hit*, or *it* (from the old neuter third person singular) to refer to inanimate objects and concepts regardless of their original OE gender.

ME also saw the rise of interrogative pronouns used as relative pronouns. OE used the definite article as the relative pronoun: *se mon se*, “the man who.” This change took several centuries, so many ME constructions may look odd to modern readers:

ME “He which that hath no wyf” = Modern English “He who has no wife.”

ME “These folk of which I telle” = Modern English, “These folk of whom I speak.”

ME “I that am” = Modern English “I who am.”

## Vocabulary

The core vocabulary of English comprised the monosyllabic words for basic concepts, bodily functions, and body parts inherited from Old English and shared with the other Germanic languages. These words include: God, man, tin, iron, life, death, limb, nose, ear, foot, mother, father, brother, earth, sea, horse, cow, lamb.

Words from French are often polysyllabic terms for the institutions of the Conquest (church, administration, law), for things imported with the Conquest (castles, courts, prisons), and terms of high culture or social status (cuisine, fashion, literature, art, decoration). Readily identifiable sound features and spellings of French words include:

-*ei*-, -*ey*-, obey, air, fair, quaint

-*oi*-, -*oy*-, boy, joy, toy, royal, exploit

-*ioun*-, -*ion*-, endings: explanation, relation

-*ment*-, endings: amendment, commandment

-*ence*-, or -*aunce*-, endings: eminence, reference

-*our*-, or -*or*-, endings: honour, colour, favour

Words which end in *-ous* are adjectives; words which end in *-us* are nouns. Thus, in Modern English, callous is an adjective, while callus is a noun.

*Norman French and Central French*

The Normans were originally a Germanic people, and they spoke a dialect of French that retained some of the sounds of the Germanic languages. Words from Norman French (or what is also known as Anglo-Norman) came in with the Conquest and are attested from the eleventh through the early thirteenth centuries. Words from Central, or Parisian, French, came in to English beginning in the thirteenth centuries, with kings and courtiers from France itself and with greater intellectual, social, and commercial contact with France.

The Norman dialect had a /w/ sound and spelling for Central French words with a /g/ sound (and a *-gu-* spelling). Note the following:

Wiles	Guile
William	Guillaume
War	Guerre
Warden	Guardian

Norman French had a /k/ sound, spelled with a *-c-*, for Central French words with a /tʃ/ sound, spelled *-ch-*. Notice the following:

Castle	Chateau
Cap	Chapeau



## Lord of This Langage

### *Chaucer's English*

ALMOST FROM THE MOMENT OF HIS DEATH in 1400, Chaucer came to be revered as the inventor of a new, poetic language. His earliest imitators, the poets John Lydgate and Thomas Hoccleve, saw him as “purifying” English from the “rudeness” of the Anglo-Saxon. At the end of the fifteenth century, England’s first printer, William Caxton, considered Chaucer the “first founder and embellisher of ornate eloquence in English,” while at the end of the sixteenth century, the poet Edmund Spenser could praise his forebear as “the well of English undefiled.” Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, poets, historians, and critics found in Chaucer the first stirrings of a literary vernacular, and nineteenth- and twentieth-century academics granted him nothing less than revolutionary status: “he decided to invent a literary English,” writes one, while for another, Chaucer “began a revolution in poetic diction.”

Just what did Chaucer do to garner such obeisance? Compared with his contemporaries, he does seem to have brought into literary English a wide range of loan words from French and Latin. But he did more than simply enlarge the vocabulary of the language. He often juxtaposed terms from Old English against those of French and Latin, creating, in the process, striking literary effects. He often placed words strategically in the poetic line for heightened emphasis, rhymed words in often memorable ways, and, on occasion, stretched syntax and word order almost to their breaking point.

More than these technical achievements, Chaucer was acutely conscious of linguistic difference as a social, historical, and even philosophical problem. He reflected on language change and dialect variation, presented characters who manipulate the world through their vernacular, and set up



the figure of a poet who is himself an innovator in the uses of language. Language is always a theme for Chaucer's poetry, and Chaucer himself took up the persona of a writer preoccupied with new words and vernacular command. As the scholar Christopher Cannon has recently shown, Chaucer's borrowings, distinctive usages, and juxtapositions of old and new words "help Chaucer's English to gather the quality of novelty to itself and to present that novelty as constitutive of its own making." In other words, Chaucer does not so much "invent" a new English as much as he invents the pose of someone who invents a new English.

In this pose lies the brilliance of Chaucerian English. Like many later writers—Milton, Wordsworth, Dickens, Twain, or Norman Mailer—he is able to create the impression of linguistic innovation, not so much by genuinely coining new words or new phrases (as Shakespeare really did) but by making us feel as if he did so. "Chaucer's English," therefore, does not simply connote the details of London Middle English of the later fourteenth century but the personal transformation of those details into an imaginative, linguistic space.

Nowhere is that transformation more brilliantly accomplished than in the famous opening of the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*.

Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote  
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,  
And bathed every veyne in swich licour  
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;  
Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth  
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth  
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne  
Hath in the Ram his half cours yronne,  
And smale foweles maken melodye,  
That slepen al the nyght with open ye  
(So priketh hem nature in hir corages),  
Than longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,  
And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,  
To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;  
And specially from every shires ende  
Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende,  
The hooly blisful martir for to seke,  
That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke.

(I.I–I8)

[When it happens that April, with his sweet showers, has pierced the drought of March to the root, and bathed every vein in that fluid from whose power the flower is given birth; when Zephyr also, with his sweet breath, has inspired the tender crops in every wood and heather, and the young sun has run half his course through the sign of the Ram, and little birds make melody who sleep all night with their eyes open (so Nature stimulates them in their hearts), then people desire to go on pilgrimages, and professional pilgrims desire to seek strange shores; and they wend their way, especially, from the end of every county in England to Canterbury, in order to seek the holy, blissful martyr who had helped them when they were sick.]

This passage is many things: an invocation, an exordium, a call for audience attention, and a display of poetic craft. Its line of sight moves from the heavens to the earth, focusing down from the zodiacal empyrean, through the clouds of meteorological reality, to the tops of the trees, to the earth itself. And once we hit the ground, the sentence then moves from the outer to the inner: from the peripheries of “every shires ende / Of Engeland” to the telos of the pilgrimage to Canterbury. Two parallel contractions, one vertical, the other horizontal, bring the world of everyday experience into sharp focus.

That focus, though, is calibrated metrically and lexically, and Chaucer emerges in these opening lines as a linguistic innovator. Words such as *engendred* and *inspired* would have been, by the late fourteenth century, part of the new vocabulary taken from the Romance languages, while words such as *vertu* and *melodye*—long in the Middle English lexicon—appear in distinctive ways. The histories of words come to the fore (*vertu*, for example, appears in all its etymological force from the Latin *vir*, masculine prowess). Figuration takes precedence over denotation (the word *melodye*, for example, evokes, as it did for many in the later fourteenth century, a sense of heavenly bliss or mirth). The Anglo-Saxon and the French contend (the nature that pricks these birds to melody, for example, gets them in their *corages*—their very francophone hearts).

Juxtaposed against these learned and Romance words is an English landscape. *Holt* and *heeth*, two old and here alliterating words, emblemize that landscape into which Zephyr’s new winds blow. And against that mythological west wind comes the zodiacal figure of the Ram: not “Aries,” but the ordinary animal. The *palmeres* on their *pilgrimages* (both originally Old French terms) “seken straunge strondes / To ferne hal-

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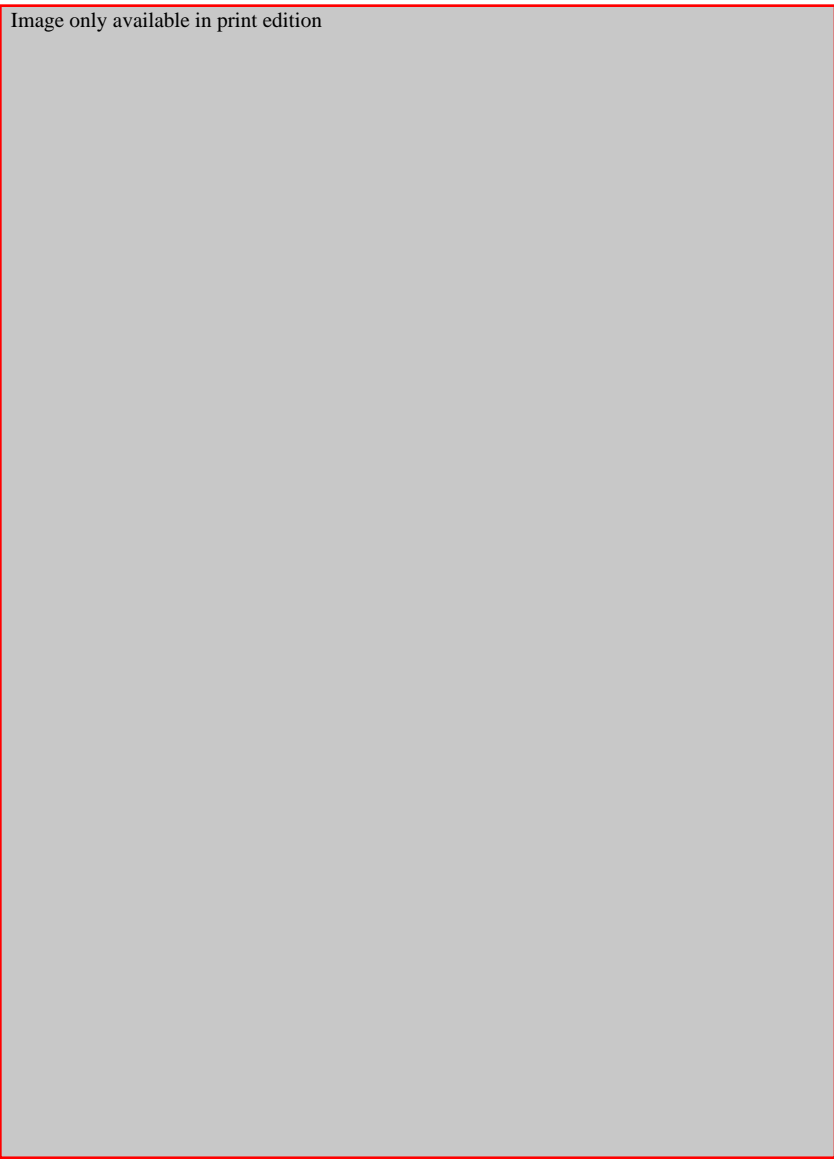


FIGURE 5.1

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Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, the opening page of the Ellesmere Manuscript. The Huntington Library, MS Ellesmere 26 C, fol 1r. Reproduced by permission of the Huntington Library.

wes, kowthe in sondry londes”—every word there, ultimately, from Old English. And, at the sentence’s conclusion, the last couplet reaffirms the Englishness of this experience. Though Beckett remains here a *martir* (a French word that entered English almost from the moment of the Norman Conquest), he stands surrounded by English modifiers: *hooly* and *blisful*. Finally, in the last line, we may find a formal reassertion of a native English prosody and idiom: “That hem hath holpen whan that they were seke.” The strong alliterations on the *h*- words slow the pace of reading down. They force the performer (for this is, as far as we can tell, a poetry that was read aloud) to articulate, to feel the repetitions soon to be felt again in the concatenating “that they.” Chaucer deploys the resources of his rich vocabulary and his metrics to suggest a politics to literary form. There is a sense of a resurgent English vernacularity here—a poem in decasyllabic couplets that apposes words of English and French origin; a poem in which the alliterative idiom can rear up; a poem in which, for all the learning of astrology or the sophistications of science, there is still an old familiar holt and heeth.

The General Prologue is an essay in the arts of language. It establishes the poem’s narrator as a describer of the world, a portraitist of people, and a philosopher of language. For his job, as he puts it at the Prologue’s close, is to retell the pilgrim’s tales faithfully: to “reherse” each word, according to the teller. Fidelity to source remains his primary concern, for if he were to falsify, expand, or invent something and attribute it to someone else, “he moot tell his tale untrew” (1.736). Plain speaking is the order of the day—“Crist spak himself ful brode in holy writ” (1.739)—and Plato’s authority dovetails with the scriptures to affirm: “The wordes moote be cosyn to the dede” (1.742). Words should reflect the things they denote. The relation of word and deed echoes a sustaining medieval debate about *verba* and *res*. From Saint Augustine, through Macrobius, Boethius, the scholastics, and the nominalists, philosophers of language and behavior recognized the complexities among intention and expression, word and object. “Every word,” Macrobius had argued, “has a true meaning,” but the circumstances and intentions of the utterer could possibly impede the true expression of that meaning. Some held that the speaker’s will to say was more important than what was said, and many recognized that words may have effects that writers or speakers did not intend. Here in the real world, words cannot have a one-to-one correspondence to the things they denote or to the wills of their speakers. Instead, there is but a rough association—cousinhood rather than, say, brotherhood.

Chaucer's narrator recognizes that potential slippage between the utterance and the idea while at the same time trying to be faithful to both. And yet, for all his claims not to find "wordes newe" in his retellings, it is Chaucer the poet who emerges from the General Prologue as precisely that finder of new words—indeed, the Middle English word *find* means both "discover" and "invent," and when Chaucer's early imitators call him the "first finder" of our language, they mean exactly that he invents it. The opening of the General Prologue really does find a new way for the vernacular, much as it finds a way for fictive pilgrims, and it is essential to see just what the linguistic landscape was in late-fourteenth-century London through which Chaucer found that way.

The London Middle English of the later fourteenth century was a lightly inflected language that had developed distinctive patterns of word order, had appropriated a large and growing French and Latin vocabulary, and developed a system of pronunciation based, largely, on the East Midlands dialect (but which had elements of other, regional sounds and forms). Verb endings, as in Old English, marked the infinitive, and the first, second, and third persons in both the singular and plural. Noun endings did not indicate grammatical gender, nor did they largely indicate cases (though there were a few exceptions). They did distinguish singular from the plural, most often using the final -s for plural, though Chaucer's Middle English also preserved (as our Modern English does, to some extent) some plural forms inherited from Old English. These include sets of words that formed their plurals by changing the root vowel of the word: foot, feet; goose, geese; mouse, mice. They also included words that formed their plural with an -en ending: child, children; brother, brethren; ox, oxen. And there remained a few words that did not distinguish singular from plural (those that survive in modern English include *sheep* and *fish*, though in Chaucer's Middle English there would have been others, including the Old English word *wonder*).

Word-order patterns were the primary determiners of meaning and effect in a sentence. The normal pattern, Subject + Verb + Object, may be illustrated by the sentence: "He takes hys leve." The inversion of Verb and Object could be used for emphasis ("I him folwed"), while Subject and Verb could be inverted for asking a question ("Gaf ye the child any thing?"). Chaucer's Middle English could use multiple negation for emphasis (in fact, English speakers and writers multiplied negation well into the eighteenth century, when grammarians believed it to be illogical). Thus, we may see, in the description of the Knight from the General Prologue, the following, staggering quadruple negation: "He nevere yet no vileynne ne

sayde in al his lyf unto no manner wight" (He never, to this point, in any way said anything bad in all of his life to any kind of person).

As in Old English (and, in fact, as in the English language well into the time of Shakespeare), Chaucer's Middle English distinguished between singular and plural and informal and formal second-person pronouns. Such forms as *thou*, *thy*, *thine*, and *thee* were singular and informal; such forms as *you*, *your*, and *ye*, were plural and formal. This distinction worked in literature and in society much as it does in modern French, German, Italian, or Spanish—that is, to mark personal relationships of power, intimacy, age, social status, and affection. There are times in Chaucer's poetry (as there are throughout medieval and Renaissance literature) when the meaning of a scene depends wholly on the subtleties of pronouns. In the "Clerk's Tale" from the *Canterbury Tales*, for example, the Italian despot Walter is dismissing his long suffering, yet patient wife, Griselda, after years of marriage (he is testing her, but cruelly). Turning to her husband, Griselda says: "Remembre yow, myn owene lord so deere / I was youre wyf, though I unworthy were" (4.881–82). She speaks to him in the formal *you* form. When Walter responds, telling her to go and take only the old smock she is wearing, he dismisses her in the *thou* form: "'the smok,' quod he, 'that thou hast on thy bak, / Let it be stille, and bere it forth with thee'" (4.890–91). But when he finishes her testing and accepts her, finally, as his beloved, Walter uses the *thou* forms of intimacy: "Thou art my wyf, ne noon oother I have" (4.1063).

Social relationships define themselves throughout the *Canterbury Tales* in *you* and *thou* forms: the Host and the Clerk address each other with *you* forms of respect in the Prologue to the "Clerk's Tale." But at the close of the "Pardoner's Tale," the Pardoner angers the Host, not just by inviting him to buy one of his bogus relics but by addressing him in the *thou* form: "Come forth, sire Hoost, and offer first anon, / And thou shalt kisse the reikes everychon" (6.943–44). When the Host brutally responds (also in the *thou* form), it takes the Knight to come in and restore both social and dramatic balance—but he does so by maintaining hierarchies through pronouns. He speaks to "ye, sire Hoost," but to the Pardoner he says "I prey thee, drawe thee neer" (6.964–66).

At moments such as this one, Chaucer reaches deep into the grammatical resources of his language to make social and dramatic claims (claims lost on modern readers unaware of the old pronouns). But here, as elsewhere, there is no single kind of English that is emblematically Chaucerian. No individual passage, however extended or extensive, can convey the

range of register, vocabulary, dialect, and idiom that he deploys throughout his writing. Chaucer evokes the high style of the Francophile court, the coarseness of the commoner, the Latinism of the scholar—and everything in between. Take the Prologue to the “Clerk’s Tale.” The Host has called upon the Clerk to tell a story, and he responds by announcing that he will recount a tale told to him by the Italian poet, Francis Petrarch. The story of patient Griselda that follows is Chaucer’s version of the narrative told by Petrarch in Latin but before him by Boccaccio in Italian. The Clerk praises his source, however, in terms that, for the first time in English, synthesize the language of poetic praise as developed in the European vernaculars.

I wol yow telle a tale which that I  
 Lerneþ at Padowe of a worthy clerk,  
 As preved by his wordes and his werk.  
 He is now deed and nailed in his cheste;  
 I prey to God so yeve his soule reste!  
 Fraunceys Petrak, the lauriat poete,  
 Highte this clerk, whos rethorike sweete  
 Enlumyned al Ytaille of poetrie . . .

(4.26–33)

[I intend to tell you a tale that I learned in Padua from a worthy clerk—his worthiness proved by his words and deeds. He is now dead and nailed in his coffin. I pray to God that He give his soul good rest. Francis Petrarch, the laureate poet, was the name of this clerk, whose sweet rhetoric illuminated all of Italy with poetry.]

As happens throughout the *Canterbury Tales*, English and European, old and new, jostle for effect. Petrarch is here a clerk (from the Latin, *clericus*) from Padowe (Padua, the first time this Italian city shows up in English writing). His worthy status (from the Old English, *weorþ*) has been proved (from the Latin), “by his wordes and his werk,” an Old English alliterative pairing. Once we get to hear Petrarch’s name, however, just about everything that follows is a new imported word: *laureate*, from the Latin *laureatus*, recalls Petrarch’s crowning as the poet laureate in Rome; *rethorike* is, of course, *rhetorica*, one of the medieval liberal arts; *enlumyned* comes from *illuminatus*, and appears here for the first time anywhere in English; and *poetrie*, from the Latin *poetria*, connotes for Chaucer literary writing in Latin by a dead author (the term Chaucer uses consistently for vernacular

writing in English, or writing by living authors, such as himself, is *making*). The character of Chaucer's Clerk displays his erudition in the range of these terms, while the poet Chaucer puts into practice the very "high style" for which Petrarch had been known.

Elsewhere in Chaucer, his high style sets out to naturalize in English the flow of a European intellectual or courtly voice. In *Troilus and Criseyde*, a poem rich with courtly gestures and itself a translation of Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*, Chaucer can sound almost classical in his allusions and his polysyllables.

O blissful light of which the bemes clere  
Adorneth al the thridde heven faire!  
O sonnes lief, O Joves doughter deere,  
Plesance of love, O goodly debonaire,  
In gentil hertes ay redy to repaire!  
O veray cause of heele and of gladnesse,  
Iheryed be thy might and thi goodnesse!

(*Troilus*, 3.1-7)

[O blissful light, whose clear beams adorn the beautiful third planetary sphere! O beloved of the sun, O Jove's dear daughter, love's delighted, O excellent gracious one, ready to go, indeed, into gracious hearts! O true cause of health and of happiness, may your might and your goodness be praised!]

In this and the previous example, new words call attention to the speaker's position of power in relationship to his addressee (in the "Clerk's Tale," it is an authoritative poet; in *Troilus and Criseyde*, it is a god). As far as we can tell, this is the first time that the verb *adorn* is used in English writing, and it introduces a string of loan words: *cler*, *plesance*, *debonaire*, *gentil*, *repaire*, *verray*, *cause*. You had to be immensely well read in late-fourteenth-century England to know these words, let alone to use them effortlessly in vernacular poetry. Indeed, Chaucer may even be playing on the etymology of *debonaire*, which came from the French, *de bonne aire*, of good disposition, but also of good "air"—he does the same thing in his translation of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, when he calls Zephyrus the "deboneire wynde."

If Chaucer can evoke the high style of a European romancier, he can equally well satirize the pretentiousness of loan words, as in the "Tale of Sir Thopas." Here, the poor pilgrim Chaucer has been called upon to tell a tale,



and what he tells is so god-awful that the Host must interrupt it with the criticism: "Thy drasty rymyng is nat worth a toord!" Turdlike must be those stanzas in which fancy, polysyllabic, French terms stand out like lumps:

Listeth, lordes, in good entent,  
And I wol telle verrayment  
Of myrthe and of solas,  
Al of a knight was fair and gent  
In bataille and in tourneyment;  
His name was sire Thopas.

("Tale of Sir Thopas," 7.712-17)

[Listen, lords, with good intention, and I will truly tell you something of pleasure and solace, concerning all about a knight who was fair and of noble birth, in battle and in tournament; his name was Sir Thopas.]

Just what kind of poet would say of his hero that his face was white "as pandemayn" (that is, *pain de main*, handmade or very fine bread)? And by the time we get through the catalogue of herbs and spices filling the forest (lycorys, cetewale, clowe-gylofre, notemuge), or the delicacies at the knight's table (mazelyn, spicerye, gyngebreede, lycorys, comyn), we too may grow as impatient as the Host. "Myne eres aken of thy drasty speche," he complains, and that is precisely the point. For this is a poetry of the ear, a poetry designed to satirize the pretensions of courtly romance by having the complicated sounds and syllables of Gallic terms jangle much like the bridle of Sir Thopas's horse.

Chaucer's is always a poetry of the ear—in part, because it was performed; in part, too, because it is designed to capture the sound of the speech of people from a range of social strata. For in addition to the high style, there are stretches of colloquial dialogue that reach deep into the recesses of the obscene: "Derk was the nyght as pich, or as the cole, / And at the window out she putte hir hole" ("Miller's Tale," 1.3731-32). And in the "Reeve's Tale," Chaucer can present so reasonable a facsimile of the Northern Middle English dialect that modern linguists have relied on this tale for its evidence of regional pronunciation at the time: "By God, need has na peer. / Hym boes serve himself that has na swayn" (1.4026-27).

We think of Chaucer as a poet of facility and flair, but he was also a prose writer whose translations and adaptations of earlier material were in some ways even more appreciated in his own time than the poetry. His trans-

lation of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* (known as the *Boece*) takes the Latin text, by way of an intermediary French translation, and seeks to develop a vernacular English philosophical diction. Take, for example, this passage from book 5, metrum 4 of the *Boece*, where Lady Philosophy is setting out the Stoic theory of sense impressions:

[The Stoics] wenden that ymages and sensibilities (that is to seyn, sensible ymaginaciouns or ellis ymaginaciouns of sensible thingis) weren enprientid into soules fro bodyes withoute-forth (as who seith that thilke Stoycienis wenden that the sowle had been nakid of itself, as a mirour or a clene parchemyn, so that alle figures most first comen fro thinges fro withoute into soules, and ben emprientid into soules): . . . ryght as we ben wont somtyme by a swift poyntel to fychen letters emprientid in the smothnesse or in the pleynesse of the table of wex or in parchemyn that ne hath no figure ne note in it.

[The Stoics believed that images and sense impressions (that is, impressions gained through the senses or impressions of things that can be sensed) were imprinted into souls from bodies outside of themselves (after the manner of those who say that these same Stoics believed that the soul was naked in origin, as if it were a mirror or a blank piece of parchment, so that all figures had to first come from things outside into souls, and thus be imprinted into souls): . . . just as we are in the habit at times of making letters impressed into the smooth surface or plain covering of a wax tablet with a fast moving stylus or pen, or on to a parchment surface that has no letter nor marking on it.]

Here, in a passage that segues from Boethius's own text to asides from learned commentaries, Chaucer's English seems to survive in only the barest of grammatical scaffolding for a lexicon heavy with French and Latin polysyllables.

By contrast, his *Treatise on the Astrolabe*—a synthesis of medieval astronomical and astrological teaching inherited from Greek and Latin, Arabic, and European teaching—simplifies a technical language for the work's addressee, Chaucer's ten-year-old son, Lewis. This treatise, Chaucer states, "wol I shewe the under full light reules and naked wordes in Englissh, for Latyn canst thou yit but small, my litel sone." Chaucer speaks in the *thou* forms as a father to a son. The old idiom for knowing a language—using

the form of the verb “can”—shows up here, as do other old vernacularisms: the use of *full* to mean “very”; the use of *light* to mean “simple”; the word *small* to mean “a little bit” (this last idiom shows up again, centuries later, when Ben Jonson would chide Shakespeare for his “small Latin and less Greek”). The English will be *naked* here, a word Chaucer uses elsewhere to mean unadorned, straightforward, simple: the “naked text” in his translation of the *Romance of the Rose* means without gloss or explanation; in the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*, he will aver his intention as “the naked text in English to declare / Of many a story,” that is, to narrate without asides or embellishment (Prologue, G-version, 86). In these terms, there is little naked about the *Boece*, as its sentences fill themselves with terms from French and Latin, with asides from commentaries, and with repetitions designed to rephrase a technical language into something equally technical (the only thing naked in the passage I had quoted earlier is the soul that the Stoics thought was empty of ideas at birth).

The Prologue to the *Treatise on the Astrolabe*, in addition to establishing the framework for instruction, offers a lesson in language itself.

Now wol I preie meekly every discret persone that redith or herith  
 this litel tretys to have my rude endityng for excused, and my super-  
 fluite of wordes, . . . And Lowys, yf so be that I shewe the in my lighte  
 Englissh as trewe conclusions touching this mater, and not oonly as  
 trewe but as many and as subtile conclusiouns, as ben shewid in  
 Latyn in eny commune tretys of the Astrelabie, konne me the more  
 thank. And preie God save the king, that is lord of this langage, and  
 alle that him feith bereth and obeieth, everich in his degree, the more  
 and the lasse. But consider wel that I ne usurpe not to have founden  
 this werk of my labour or of myn engyn. I n’am but a lewd compila-  
 tor of the labour of olde astrologiens, and have it translated in myn  
 Englissh only for thy doctrine.

[Now I intend to pray humbly to every individual person that reads  
 or hears this little treatise to excuse me of my coarse writing and  
 the overabundance of words. . . . And Lewis, if it should happen  
 that I reveal to you in my easy English the conclusions concerning  
 this material in as true a fashion as any ordinary treatise shows in  
 Latin—conclusions not only as true, but as many and as subtle as  
 in those treatises—then you can thank me the more. And I pray to  
 God to save the king, who is lord of this language, and to save all of

them that have faith and obey, each one according to his social rank, the greater and the lesser. But recognize truly that I have not taken over the authority for this work, nor originated any of it through the activity of my imagination. I am nothing but a simple compiler of the work of old astrologers, and I have translated it into my English only for your instruction.]

Chaucer sets out to explain, and if at times that explanation requires some extra verbiage, so be it. It seems significant in these sentences that when Chaucer writes about the basics he does so in basic English, and when he invokes a pedagogical difficulty or a claim for social status, he does so in words borrowed from French or Latin. He prays *meekly*, but the people he addresses are *discreet*: judicious, prudent, courteous (a word from a French courtly vocabulary; think ahead to Shakespeare's Falstaff: "The better part of valor is discretion"). He apologizes for his "superfluite of wordes" (and *superfluity* appears to have come into English only in the 1380s—it is a word that calls attention to itself, a bit of self-conscious superfluity). Chaucer seeks to write "light English," but when he writes about what lies in his Latin sources, he refers to "subtile conclusiouns." And when he prays to God to save the king, he makes him "lord of this langage," and in the process gives a powerful political cast to writing in the vernacular.

This is the point of the *Treatise*, more than any technical education in the arts of astrology. For the first time ever, English is the language of the king (though the exact phrase, "the king's English," does not appear until Shakespeare). And for the first time, Chaucer establishes a literary authority in the vernacular as a political problem. Lest we think that he has made all this up, he avers that he has stuck closely to his sources. He is "but a lewd compiler," not a usurper. Chaucer's is one of the very first uses of this word, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (s.v., *usurp*, vb.), and it brilliantly brings together politics and language in a way that takes us back to Henry III's Proclamation and to the whole history of Anglo-French courtly commerce. As my earlier chapters illustrated, English was gradually coming into political prominence by the close of the fourteenth century. True, parliamentary records were still kept in French, but the language of its arguments was mandated as English. History was coming to be written in the language; John Wycliff and his followers were translating the Bible into English; Julian of Norwich was composing complex theological texts in it; and, in 1388, Parliament was petitioned in English, for the first time, by the Mercer's Guild.

And yet, French was still there. There is no surviving parliamentary petition in English after 1388 until about 1413. Richard the II (the king who was lord of Chaucer's "langage") lived little in the language (his successor, Henry IV, was, as I had mentioned previously, the first post-Conquest king to leave a will in English). During the Rising of 1381—perhaps the most disruptive social event of the English Middle Ages and one so threatening that Chaucer, along with his poetic contemporaries John Gower and William Langland, could not get away from writing about it—the insurgent groups (made up of peasants, artisans, and some local professionals) made much of their command of English and of the official lack of it. In the words of Steven Justice, whose study *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* illuminates this vernacular insurgency, the political and public uses of English were acts affirming "that those who read only English—or even could only have English read to them—had a stake in the intellectual and political life of church and realm" (30). What Justice calls "the linguistic specialization of official culture," that is, its conduct in French and Latin, "was a resentment suffered for generations" (70).

So in a world of an insurgent English, where French remained royal and official and yet was in some sense under siege, Chaucer's avowals at the close of the Prologue to the *Treatise on the Astrolabe* have a profound political and linguistic effect. Richard II did not work his lordship in English, and usurpation was a threat to all. Indeed, but a few years after Chaucer put the *Astrolabe* together, Henry Bolingbrooke took up—some would have said usurped—King Richard's throne. That is the very word used by the poet of a mid-fifteenth-century account:

To have in mynde callyng to Remembraunce  
 The gret wrongys doon of oold antiquitey,  
 Unrightful heyres by wrong alyaunce  
 Usurpyng this Royaume caused gret adversitey;  
 Kyng Richard the secounde, high of dignytee,  
 Whiche of Ingeland was Rightful enheritoure,  
 In whos tyme ther was habundaunce with plentee  
 Of welthe & erthely Ioye without langoure.  
 ("A political retrospect," dated to 1462)

[To have in mind calling into remembrance the great wrongs done in ancient times, unrightful heirs who, by making bad alliances usurped this realm and caused great adversity; King Richard the

Second, great in his dignity, was the rightful inheritor of England, in whose time there was great abundance of wealth and earthly joy without distress.]

Here, in this awkward stanza of late Middle English verse, we can see something of the legacy of Chaucer's language and the politics of words. For in a poem praising the rights of a deposed English king, we find far more French words than English. This is a diction of the polysyllable, what late-medieval writers would call "aureate," or golden, language and would praise (or sometimes blame) Chaucer for inaugurating. The shimmering high-concept words—remembrance, antiquity, alliance, adversity, dignity, inheritor, abundance, languor—evoke not just a political but a linguistic former age: an age of Francophile inheritance. This is no naked text in English.

And, for that matter, neither is Chaucer's. Even when he is at his most straightforward, his most Saxon, his most monosyllabically simple, Chaucer is never without ambiguity or double edge. The ironies of the *Astrolabe* remind us that if Richard II was really no lord of the English language, Chaucer was. His paternity over the diction and the forms of English literature was well acknowledged (he came to be called the "father" of English poetry within only decades of his death). Even if he did not coin many new words, he deployed an emerging vocabulary in a new and critically effective way. Even if he used the resources of Middle English available to him, he used *all* those resources, writing in the registers, the dialects, and the idioms of an entire English-speaking nation. Even if at the close of the Prologue to the *Astrolabe* Chaucer avows that he has done nothing original—that he has not *founden*, that is, invented, anything—and even if he claims this stance throughout his literary works, it is clear that he transformed the legacy of Latin, French, Italian, and English literature available to him into a unique synthesis of styles.

Over a century after the *Astrolabe* was written, English authors came to use the word "usurp" to mean appropriating words from other languages. Sir Thomas Elyot notes in his *Book of the Governor* (1531) that he has been "constrained to usurpe a latine word" where none exists in English. For the next three centuries, according to the *OED*, words were "usurped" for English—as if writers were in some sense conquerors of the linguistic imagination. Chaucer, it may be said, usurped a nation of new words, and in the process, made himself a lord of language that no king—rightful or usurping—could become.